

Liberalism across the Atlantic

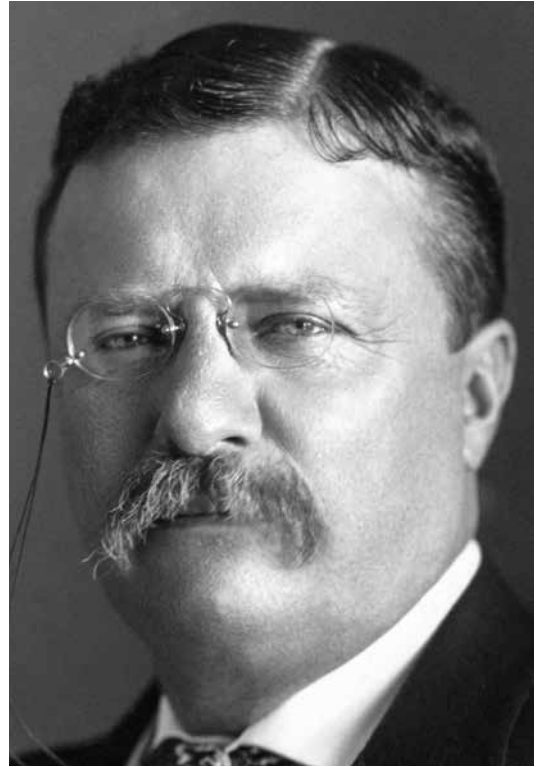
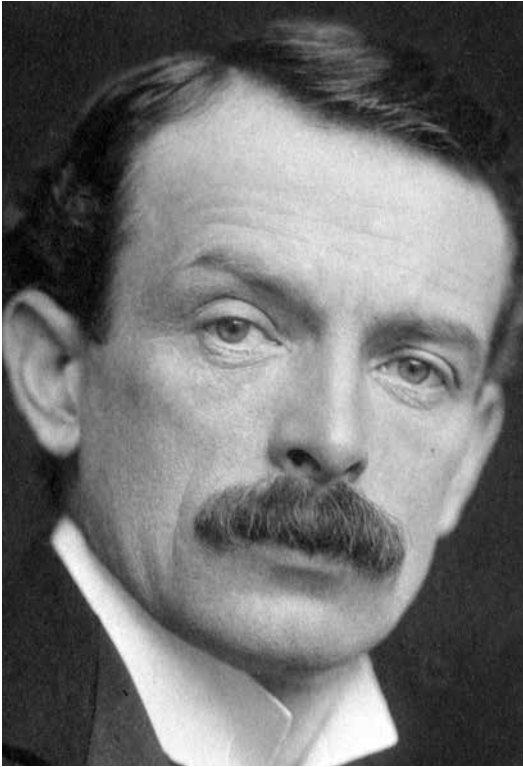
Kenneth O. Morgan examines the parallels between British and American Liberalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Transatlantic Liberalism: Britain and the United States 1870–1920

IN THE YEARS after the end of the American civil war in 1865, liberalism in Britain and the United States was separate but equal. An insular or isolationist view has been taken of each. American Progressivism, in states, cities and the nation at large has been taken as a process of self-examination and internal analysis after the excitements of American imperialism and the war with Spain in 1898 and what Richard Hofstadter called ‘the psychic crisis’ of the 1890s.¹ In Britain the reform movements of the dawn of the twentieth century have seemed to be a reaction after the divisions of the South African War. A preoccupation with internal change – constitutional, social and economic – the House of Lords, Irish home rule, disestablishment of the Welsh church, women’s suffrage and above all the ‘new Liberalism’ of social welfare were themes that essentially implied a new focus on domestic issues. Such views are put forward by both British and American historians, neither perhaps being wholly at ease with the internal travails of their contemporaries across the ocean.

Yet these accounts miss out a hugely important dimension. It was captured by the New York *The Forum* in October 1906 when it spoke of the unconscious influence the

transatlantic branch of the great English-speaking race exercises on the cis-Atlantic branch and vice versa’.² Political commentators like Lyman Abbott and Benjamin Flower commented that American Progressivism after 1900 was part of ‘a world-wide reform movement paralleled on each side of the Atlantic. The word ‘Progressives’ in the Theodore Roosevelt–Woodrow Wilson era in the US was freely applied to British reformers in the Asquith–Lloyd George period by editors and journalists like C.P. Scott in the *Manchester Guardian* and A.G. Gardiner in the *Daily News*. The collaboration between the Liberal and Labour parties down to 1914 was widely referred to as ‘a Progressive alliance’. There had been much talk of the links between the Jacksonian Democrats in Washington and British radicals at the time of the Reform Act of 1832. This idea was revived in Liberal Democrat circles at the time of an anti-Conservative mood surrounding the local elections in May 1922. The link was at its closest around the latter decades of the nineteenth century although the two ‘Anglo-Saxon’ countries drifted apart thereafter, especially through America’s rise as a world power shown in the Anglo–American diplomatic conflicts over the boundary between Venezuela and British



British and American liberals: David Lloyd George (1863–1945) in 1902 (© National Portrait Gallery, London) and Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) c.1904

Guiana in 1902–3. Nevertheless, the interaction between British and American reform movements is too persuasive to be brushed aside. The relationship between them was part of the worldwide response by nations old and new to the challenges of urbanization and industrialization, and the brute power of capitalism and inequality.

It is, therefore, highly praiseworthy that this *Journal* in its Winter 2021–22 issue devoted space to a treatment of American Liberalism, the discussion admirably summed up by Neil Stockley. In this debate, Helena Rosenblatt of New York University correctly points out the wider bonds with European Liberalism, German and French as well as British (Swiss and Danish might also be added in relation to local cantonal government and progressive agriculture), while James Traub picked up the story of revived and transformed American Liberalism after the

glory days of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and the external pressures of the Cold War. Both discussions are valuable but both tend to leave out the vital Anglo–American dimension. This contribution attempts to put it back.

The basic contours of British Liberalism will be very familiar to readers of this *Journal*. It was the product of two revolutions, the industrial transformation which rebalanced the economy and social order and created the great question of how they would be adapted to the older social order, and of course the 1789 revolution in France which gave new emphasis to ideas of democracy, republicanism and human rights. Public dialogue shifted fundamentally from a debate on the relations of Crown and parliament, as shown in Burke's famous parliamentary motion of 1782, to one of relations between parliament and people. A new tone of social conflict entered following the 'massacre'

at Peterloo, in 1819. As Shelley wrote in a powerful poem ‘The Masque of Anarchy’ (1819), ‘We are many, ye are few’. The outcome was the passage of the Reform Act of 1832. Though nowhere near creating a democracy, it was a vital first step. The idea of institutional reform swept into many other areas, the established Church, the law, local government and, more perniciously, the Poor Law Act of 1834, with its ideology of ‘less eligibility’.

The miscellaneous supporters of reform turned into a nationwide party in the late 1850s. A central registration body was set up in London to marshal the vote. In deference to English custom, a new social club, the Reform, was formed by ex-Whigs, radicals and Irish representatives in Pall Mall, with a political as well as social and gastronomic roles. The party, when it came into power in 1859 under so unliberal a figure as Lord Palmerston, rapidly expanded in the country as a whole, and especially in the new industrial areas of northern England. Freed by a reduced duty on paper, important newspapers arose to promote the Liberal cause such as the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Leeds Mercury*. They grew in every major city in England and Scotland, while in Wales all the Welsh-language newspapers were Liberal, such as Thomas Gee’s *Baner ac Amserau Cymru* in rural Denbigh, with the

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close links between the press, the nonconformist chapels and soon the elected local authorities over the disestablishment of the Church in Wales.³ It was a Celtic variation on the historic slogan of Peace, Retrenchment and Reform.

Of course, the Liberal Party was far more than a voting machine. Liberalism was a faith, a creed, a nexus of ethical beliefs which had

important social, economic and legal aspects. Both creed and party were, for instance, closely connected with the nonconformist chapels. Following connections built up with the Whigs in the Restoration period, the chapels battled for equal rights and status as entrants into universities (notably Oxford and Cambridge), as magistrates and peers, and for their right to be baptised and buried in parish churchyards. In Wales, Dissenters, following the creed of perhaps three-quarters of the population as shown in a census of 1851, felt themselves to be a second-class citizenry, at odds not only with common democracy but with the very idea of Wales as a nation.

Secondly, Liberalism had a vital economic philosophy, that of free trade, a guarantee not only of manufacturing prosperity but, in the views of Cobden and Bright, of international harmony. Following the eighteenth-century French Encyclopaedists, philosophes like Denis Diderot, and later English Philosophical Radicals such as Bentham, Ricardo and John Stuart Mill, a huge blow was struck for liberal free-market principles with the repeal of the Corn Laws under the Peel ministry in 1846. Gladstone, a brilliant young Conservative, became its major recruit and outstanding moral and political force, four times prime minister, popularly

christened ‘the grand old man’ and ‘the People’s William’.

In a different area, Liberalism became a major international force, associated with overseas nationalists (invariably located

in England only). Even through such belligerent spokesmen as Palmerston, it backed the liberation of Greeks in the 1820s, Hungarians in the 1840s, Italians in the 1850s and Bulgarians in the 1870s. Nationalist leaders like Mazzini, Garibaldi and Kossuth became popular heroes in Britain. Giuseppe Garibaldi was formally received in the sanctum of the Reform Club

when he visited London. Significantly these enthusiasms did not apply to Britain's own conquests. In the Boer War of 1899–1902 leading Liberals were deeply divided and some spoke of their deep disgust with the 'methods of barbarism' employed in near-genocide against Afrikaaner women and children in Kitchener's concentration camps on the veldt.

In fact, nationalism within the United Kingdom proved to be a real problem for the Liberals and their principles, most damagingly so after 1886 when Gladstone first took up the cause of home rule for Ireland. There were major defections from the party, Lord Hartington amongst the Whigs, Joseph Chamberlain, in Birmingham, the leading popular radical in the party. Thereafter, with the First Home Rule Bill failing in the Commons, the Liberals lost their majority in England (save in 1906) and were now increasingly dependent on their strength in Scotland and Wales; both nations spoke in a language that sounded very much like home rule for their nations also. Gladstone, their great unifier in 1868, was now a force for division and disunion.

The most destructive threat of all facing the Liberals was neither libertarian nonconformists nor Liberal imperialists, but the rise of organised labour, skilled and later unskilled. The Liberals, like the US Progressives, were based on professional middle-class groups in urban and suburban areas, and free-trade industrialists in the coal, cotton and shipbuilding industries. Very many working-class electors, popularly known as Lib-Labs, also threw their weight behind Gladstonian Liberals, their power increased by the creation of new working-class constituencies in the redistribution of seats that accompanied the Reform Act of 1884–85 (along with a range of suburban seats where a revived Conservative Party was to flourish). It was very common for coal owners and miners' agents both to be staunch Liberals, as with D. A. Thomas, head of the Cambrian Combine in the Rhondda valleys, and 'Mabon', president of the

South Wales Miners, from the late 1880s. But with the growth of frequent industrial conflict and less stable employment in the mines at the dawn of the twentieth century, a growing flood of working-class supporters peeled off from the party, apprehensive of the loss of the right to strike and also of the loss of wider rights for the trade union movement.

In the Edwardian years, major new themes were changing public dialogue. The prosperity of the British economy in the one-time 'workshop of the world' was threatened by foreign competitors in Germany and America. The malign word 'unemployment' entered the language. Politically most damaging was the alliance of mass trade unions with growing local groups of socialists, like Keir Hardie who was elected to parliament for West Ham in 1892 and then Merthyr Tydfil in 1900 during the Boer War. A new workers' party came into being in 1906, winning 29 seats as an independent party at the general election, at which a secret pact was concluded between the Liberal and Labour parties about the decision to fight individual seats. The progressive alliance and the existence of an anti-Tory partnership was now demonstrated, but clearly fundamental questions were being asked of both the class basis and the moral purpose of Liberalism as a political force and an organised party. The old Victorian reform movement would have to change drastically in order to survive and have a viable future.

The answer arrived at by the Liberals was to turn themselves from a basically individualist, free-trade party into a far more collectivist, radical movement, borrowing fundamental ideas of public change from their socialist rivals. This had been long in the making. State collectivist ideas from social theorists like L. T. Hobhouse and the more radical J. A. Hobson (whose economic critique of capitalism attracted the young Lenin), and sociologists like Charles Booth, Seebohm Rowntree and Leo Chiozza Money, public inquiries into

poverty, old age, health (stimulated by reports on the poor medical condition of recruits for the Boer War), the poor law and unemployment, together shattered the idea of traditional liberalism. Gladstone's old Victorian liberalism, itemised in the Liberals' Newcastle Programme in 1891, was mutating into a social New Liberalism. Indeed, the roots of this change went deep. Gladstone himself had written an important article in the 1860s, 'Kin beyond the Sea' which foretold a new democratic relationship between the United Kingdom and the rising American republic. These ideas were, to varying degrees, championed by the Liberal governments of Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith, and especially by Lloyd George who became Chancellor of the Exchequer and Churchill who became President of the Board of Trade and then Home Secretary, as well as by a wide array of popular newspapers and periodicals. New reforms, such as old age pensions, national health insurance, labour exchanges and children's allowances, changed the very idea of liberalism. There was some reinforcement of reform during the first world war, including votes for women (only those over 30 in the first instance). A generation of New Liberals from Charles Masterman to William Beveridge created the basis for welfare state, a glorious high noon for the Liberal conscience.

There was a brief revival of the New Liberalism during and just after the First World War from Lloyd George's controversial post-war coalition government, with a considerable extension of unemployment insurance, Christopher Addison's Housing Act of 1919 and Fisher's major Education Act in 1918. However, the Liberal Party itself, the main vehicle of reform for three-quarters of a century was split into fragments by the manoeuvres of Lloyd George's coalition. By 1924 it was clear that the Labour Party had become the main party of the left, and the Conservatives the dominant party of government which it remained until well into the twenty-first century. The old Gladstonian

liberalism was a casualty of total war. The visionary gleam, the glory and the dream had fled, seemingly for ever.

The flowering of American Progressivism; the British Liberal influence

One conclusion that can be drawn from British Liberalism's near-century of dominance is that the influence upon it of reform movements across the Atlantic was relatively slight. This is in some ways surprising because American historians have seen liberalism as the governing idea of the United States.⁴ It was a land born free, a view confirmed by the victory of the anti-slavery north in the civil war. In the aftermath of the American revolution, there was strong involvement of a British publicist like Tom Paine with radical developments in the US. There was some talk of political collaboration between reformers in Britain after 1815 and the Jacksonian Democrats in the States shortly afterwards. In the forties and fifties, Cobden and Bright were well known for their links with American liberal movements like anti-slavery: Bright and Abraham Lincoln had an extended wartime correspondence despite Bright's Quaker pacifism. Cobden was popularly known as 'the member for America'.⁵ However, the growth of protectionist sentiment and practice by American governments, Democratic and Republican, for example the McKinley tariff of 1891 which did much damage to the British tinplate and steel industries, led to loud protests from British free-trade liberals who helped to keep their own country on the free-trade path down to the 1930s.

In assessing the links between British and US Liberals when the US Progressive movement began to emerge, it is clear that the influence of US developments on British reform was episodic and often indirect. The constitutional systems of the two countries were too different to make for a consistent relationship. With its

unwritten constitutional arrangements based on parliamentary rather than popular sovereignty and tilted towards prerogative powers at the centre, Britain was quite distinct from the sprawling federal procedures of the United States. There was, it is true, much quoting by A.V. Dicey and other British scholars of the systems of the United States during the disputes between the Lords and the Commons over the Parliament Bill in 1909–11 with Conservatives, rather than Liberals, citing the American prevalence for checks and balances and the separation of powers, but the effect of the bill was to diminish considerably the restrictive powers over the Commons of the House of Lords, in any case an undemocratic, unelected body. Conservative calls (backed, amongst others by King George V) for a referendum on legislation as existed in some of the United States, to ward off Irish home rule, led nowhere, as did calls for the election of judges, regarded in both countries as a reactionary force which imperilled the rule of law and impartial judicial scrutiny of legislation. By contrast, there was limited influence on these current controversies from the writings of Bryce, author of a famous academic study of the American Commonwealth, and for a lengthy period a Liberal MP and Cabinet minister. Nor were the US and Britain, with the liberals Asquith and Woodrow Wilson at the heads of their respective administrations, close in inter-

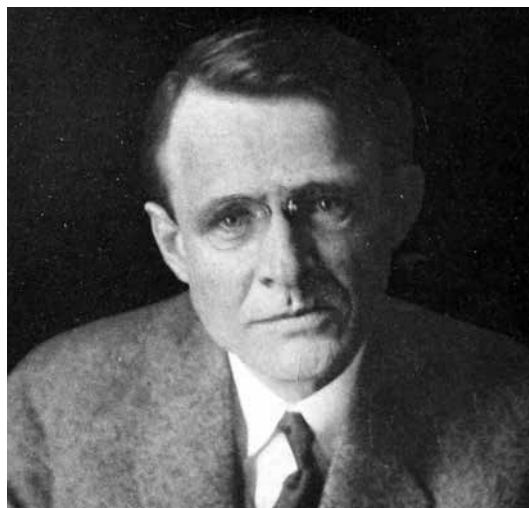
The relationship between liberals in both countries, despite being a theme much neglected by later historians, was powerful and consistent. It was illustrated by the contacts between David Lloyd George and Theodore Roosevelt, president from 1897 and founder of a highly influential, breakaway Progressive party.

national relations, notwithstanding their future alliance during the First World War. The notion of an Anglo-Saxon ‘special relationship’ was the invention of a far later era, and of Churchillian rhetoric in the Cold War after 1945.

On the other hand, the relationship between liberals in both countries, despite being a theme much neglected by later historians, was powerful and consistent. It was illustrated by the contacts between David Lloyd George and Theodore Roosevelt, president from 1897 and founder of a highly influential, breakaway Progressive party. He would run against the sitting Republican president William Taft in the presidential election of 1912, which guaranteed the latter’s humiliating defeat. Roosevelt’s programme of broad social reform and a forceful foreign and naval policy chimed in with the policy Lloyd George had proposed as the basis for a national coalition government at a Buckingham Palace conference in the summer of 1910.⁶ Evidently Roosevelt’s leisure interests such as shooting wildlife in Africa did not disturb the Welshman’s sensibilities. When Roosevelt died during the Paris peace conference, Lloyd George, strongly backed on this occasion by Clemenceau, lamented the loss of a great international statesman, and deplored the lack of grief displayed by Woodrow Wilson, a greatly inferior man in the view of the two European leaders. Curiously, Lloyd George, the great maker and unmaker of coalitions in Britain, thought Roosevelt made a massive error in breaking with his own party: ‘He should never have quarrelled with the machine’.⁷

Lloyd George at this time endorsed Lord Milner’s outlook, ominously termed ‘nationalist socialism’ and, in the rumbustious T.R., he found its perfect embodiment. Like Louis Botha in South Africa, Roosevelt symbolised to Lloyd George the model of virile executive

leadership. The Progressives offered Americans of all parties and none a new antidote to the ‘robber barons’ now dominating the industrial and business scene in the post-Reconstruction era. But they did so by working within the



capitalist order, unlike the agrarian Populists of the south and west who wished to replace the gold standard with ‘free silver’, a position unacceptable in these pre-Keynesian times to British liberals and one which doomed the Populist champion of radical Democrats to inevitable electoral defeat in 1900 and 1906. Sound money Progressives were far more trustworthy. British Liberals shared many of the targets and used many of the techniques of their US counterparts, notably the prominent role of ‘muckraking’ journalists. The new ethic coming from across the Atlantic had a widespread effect on American society and in the most unlikely and remote of places. William Allen White, who edited the local Gazette in the small town of Emporia in rural Kansas provided regular and highly supportive articles for his readers on the social reforms of the Liberal government after 1906. He wrote emotionally of how he and his wife had tears in their eyes when joining in a march in London on behalf of Lloyd George’s ‘People’s Budget’ in 1909. ‘We felt we were part of something great and beautiful. We did not know exactly what except that we knew the dog had slipped off his leash and this was the time to howl.’⁸

A new flood of Progressive journalists focused particularly on the urban problems of Europe, in Germany and especially Britain. The best informed of them was Frederic Howe, whose long career spanned working for Tom Johnson in Ohio as a young man in the 1880s to Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 1930s, when he worked with Jerome Frank on the Agricultural Adjustment Act programme. He wrote indefatigably for a wide range of Progressive journals like *The Outlook*, *Arena* and *The Forum* alongside penning a series of powerful and detailed monographs - *The City: the Hope*

American progressives:

Frederic Howe (1867–1940) in 1912

Jane Addams (1860–1935), nd

Robert ‘Fighting Bob’ LaFollette (1855–1925) after 1905

of Democracy (1905), *The British City: the beginning of Democracy* (1907) and *European Cities at Work* (1913). Also of much interest is Howe's autobiographical *Confessions of a Reformer* (1925). At a time when reformers in Britain and other European countries viewed the rapid growth of the city with hostility and even fear, fanned by crime and disorder, by the unsolved murders of Jack the Ripper and the violence at Sidney Street in the East End of London, Howe regarded the British city as representing 'the high water mark of democracy',⁹ contrasting with the elitist power exerted over parliament by the landed gentry. In Britain, cities enjoyed a growing range of freedoms and responsibilities in Howe's view, though he did underestimate the way in which central government was eating away at the resources of local authorities in Britain, a major reason for the new land taxes proposed in Lloyd George's 1909 budget. Even so, whereas American liberals tended to regard their own cities with indifference and even distaste, in Britain the public dynamism of industrial cities like Manchester, Glasgow and Joseph Chamberlain's Birmingham met with the enthusiasm of transatlantic observers like Frederic Howe. The London County Council was widely regarded in America as the greatest and most progressive local authority in the world until the rule of Liberal councillors was terminated by Conservative local election victory in 1907.

Hence, one major policy influence that flowed from British Liberalism to the United States was urban reform, including settlement houses and other methods of coping with the poverty and social inequality of large cities. Toynbee Hall in London's East End became an inspiration not only for young radicals like Clement Attlee but also for important overseas reformers like Jane Addams who visited the Hall in 1888.¹⁰ She then founded Hull House in Chicago, another small, face-to-face community where the poor could be protected and given a sense of moral independence. It was also

important, in view of the racial and religious prejudice shown to many immigrants, that they should have the opportunity to wear their traditional style of dress and preserve their own customs and language. The ethic of Hull House was drawn from the American Protestant churches, which attracted many idealistic women like Ethel Starr and Vida Scudder, and later Florence Kelley and Lillian Wald, who carried their social passions into tenement house reform in New York City and other cities.¹¹ Another important recruit was to be Frances Perkins, Secretary for Labor under Franklin Roosevelt and the first female Cabinet minister during the New Deal.

A different transatlantic borrowing was in adult education where the American socialist historian Charles Beard helped Walter Vrooman to set up Ruskin College, to enable working-class trade unionists to gain degrees. Like several other American radicals, such as Joseph Fels, a philanthropic soap manufacturer, and Dr Stanton Coit, a pillar of the Ethical Church, Beard spent much time in England working intimately with the British labour movement, and Ruskin College flourished in the years down to 1914.

A corollary of the settlement houses was a typically American enthusiasm for civic and local government reform, which Progressives championed. One stronghold was the state of Wisconsin in the mid-West, where Governor, later Senator, 'Fighting Bob' La Follette used links with academics in the new University of Wisconsin in Madison to promote a programme of social and civic reform, aligned with public enterprise – 'the Wisconsin idea' as it was known.¹² Here again, British Liberalism was a strong inspiration, especially as fear grew of how corrupt 'robber barons' were strangling the life and independence of local communities. One very influential book was British urban reformer Albert Shaw's *Municipal Government in Great Britain* (1895). The writings of Shaw went beyond the objectives of the 'civil service reform' championed by E.L. Godkin of

the Nation and Charles Adams and the affluent 'Genteel Reformers' of the 1870s.¹³ More contemporary was Lincoln Steffens's bold exposure of the open graft in cities like St. Louis, which caused a sensation. To Shaw and others, British cities were honest and disinterested while their US counterparts were corrupt and dominated by selfish private interests. One clear consequence was the emergence of reform mayors and other local activists like the Welsh-American 'Golden Rule' Jones in Toledo, Ohio, and Hazen Pingree in Detroit.

The US National Civic Federation focused its attention on the British urban experience. In 1909 the Federation sent a commission of inquiry to investigate British municipal government. It remained incurably optimistic about British city and municipal reform. The success of municipal trading and publicly owned railway systems and gas and electricity services were instances of the great financial success that self-governing municipalities could achieve.¹⁴ Frederic Howe saw British businessmen applying their talents in local government productively in a public-spirited way but then, as Lincoln Steffens wryly observed, 'Howe believed in businessmen'.¹⁵ Reformers heralded the rise of the city planner, 'the man in the grey flannel suit' in the later argot. Like American liberals more generally, Progressives had boundless, perhaps excessive, faith in the enlightenment and humanity released in a free citizenry, detached from American capitalist considerations of economic self-interest.

In addition to social and urban reform, there was a third stream to American Progressivism – direct democracy. Here, however, the British Liberal tradition, with its strong commitment to parliamentary sovereignty, had distinctly less impact. American Progressives believed in direct democracy. The cure for democratic deficiencies was more democracy. Opening up and purifying the American electoral system would, of itself, produce a purer and more effective political society.

There were calls for primaries in the selection of candidates, and this soon developed across the nation including in presidential elections. There were calls for more direct voter influence on their authorities in the form of the referendum, the initiative and the recall of officials.¹⁶ Most startling of all for British liberalism, devoted to the rule of law and the political independence of the judiciary ever since the Act of Settlement in 1701, was the call for the direct election of judges. This met with some sympathy in the labour movement where anti-labour decisions by the British high court, on the pattern of the Taff Vale case in 1901, threatened the basic right to strike. But leaders of the Labour Party like Ramsay MacDonald were traditional in their view of the constitution. The political controversies in the United States that pursued Supreme Court judgements in matters involving tariffs and inter-state commerce, followed in more recent times by moral issues such as abortion and the *Roe v. Wade* controversy, ensured that here was an area of constitutional change which British liberals entered with hesitation. Liberal/Liberal Democrat calls for proportional representation were sunk in the British referendum of 2011, and the experience of a Conservative/Liberal Democrat government under David Cameron, which pursued an economically damaging programme of fiscal austerity, did not inspire confidence in such ideas.

Nevertheless, the influence on both the theory and practice of the Progressive movement in America during the years between the Reconstruction and the end of the First World War are an important, even exciting phase of Anglo-American liberalism. The period covered in James Traub's discussion in this Journal was quite different. While its influence on American internal history was centrally important down to the 1960s (as I well recall myself),¹⁷ Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was a national, even nationalist campaign, and had little effect on European reform movements. Roosevelt's

deliberate blitzing of the world economic conference in London in the spring of 1933 was a blunt demonstration of going it alone, while the US economy stayed ‘over there’. British people of the left did not identify with its principles or its targets; Lloyd George’s description in 1933 of his plans for conquering unemploy-

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ment as a British ‘New Deal’ did not carry much weight. Indeed it must be admitted that the success of the New Deal in reducing US unemployment until the outbreak of war was limited. Perhaps in Britain only the Gaitskellite wing of the Labour Party in the 1960s came near to embracing US New Deal ideas, at Ditchley Park and elsewhere. Philip Williams’s biography has shown how Gaitskell himself felt intuitively close to ‘New Dealer Liberals’ like Harriman and Rusk, especially if they had been Rhodes scholars at Oxford or active in the English-Speaking Union.¹⁸

However, there was one great divide between British and American liberals in the early years of the last century apart from the miles of the Atlantic Ocean. When American reformers looked more closely at who their British role models were, a problem emerged. In both countries, not surprisingly, the reformers were professional, middle class, white men (along with distinguished women like Jane Addams and Progressive novelists). They approached the world of labour from the outside; issues of racial discrimination were largely ignored until after the Second World War, as was the legacy of slavery and of empire. After the Versailles treaty and the American refusal to enter the League of Nations, Progressivism in America lost its thrust. The First World War

effectively killed off a movement which did not naturally fit in with a climate of nationalist belligerence. Post-war America lapsed into the ‘Red Scare’, the regime of isolationist mediocrities like President Warren Gamaliel Harding and illiberal fixations like an assault on the teaching of evolution in US schools in the

Scopes case in Tennessee. Robert La Follette’s presidential campaign in 1924 as an independent ‘Progressive’ attracted limited support. Britain ended up with mass unemployment and a general strike, and

its own version of anti-Bolshevism. Progressive forces in both countries were on the retreat.

But there was in any case a divergence in the respective ideas of democracy. It emerged in the Progressive journal *The Outlook* when it surveyed the personnel of the new Liberal government elected in 1906: eleven graduates of Oxford, five from one college, Balliol. They, in partnership with the English ‘public’ boarding schools, apparently comprised ‘the highest and finest traditions of self-culture not to mention muscular Christianity – an expert golfer, a boxer, cricketer, oarsman, fisherman, footballer and a ‘pedestrian’.¹⁹ A bird-watcher (Grey) might have been added to these renaissance men. Walter Hines Page later lavished praise on ministers like Morley, Grey and Lulu Harcourt, for their patrician background. ‘For generations English university life has been a preparation for participation in English public life.’²⁰ David Lloyd George, an outsider brought up in the relatively poor home of a shoemaker in distant Wales, attracted no such enthusiasm. Worse still, American Progressives waxed lyrical at the idea of empire. The periodical *The Outlook* extolled the merits of Minto and Cromer as viceroys of India. The Congress movement was ignored. ‘It may be remarked that Great Britain never chooses any but able men for this important post. The British Empire has been,

and is, a tremendous force for the advancement of civilisation throughout the world'.²¹ General Wood attempted to develop his own idea of an antiseptic Anglo-Saxon utopia when he governed America's newest imperial colony in Cuba after the war with Spain. Indeed, distinguished American scholars like William Leuchtenburg have claimed that the entire Progressive movement was a product of American imperialism with humanitarian additions.²² Britain was for American Progressives a model like the Roman empire in the Age of the Antonines – rational, ordered and above all clean. Left-wing critics at the time, like Herbert Croly or Lincoln Steffens, condemned such elitist comparisons, as did La Follette in Wisconsin. The gulf between Eastern and Mid-West Progressives hastened their joint decline. British Liberals did not succeed in making America more democratic or tolerant, as McCarthyism was to show. Rather they helped both countries to embody a humanised welfare capitalism in a way that endures to the present time. British influences were an essential backdrop to the later reforms of Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson and Barack Obama. Perhaps herein, not in military or naval hardware, lies the true 'special relationship' between the two nations.

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- 1 Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (Vintage Books, 1967), pp. 147ff.
- 2 *The Forum*, October 1906, pp. 176–77
- 3 Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics, 1868–1922* (University of Wales Press, 1963)
- 4 e.g., Louis Hartz, *The Tradition of American Liberalism* (1955).
- 5 Donald Read, *Cobden and Bright* (Edward Arnold, 1957)
- 6 This document is printed in Sir Charles Petrie (ed.), *Life and Letters of Austen Chamberlain*, vol. II (Cassell, 1940), pp. 131–38
- 7 David Lloyd George, *The Truth about the Peace Treaties* (Gollancz, 1938), pp. 226, 231–32
- 8 *The Outlook*, 20 November 1909, pp. 605–07
- 9 Howe, *The British City*.
- 10 See Kenneth O. Morgan, 'The Legend of Saint Jane', *Dialogue* (Washington D.C., 1976), pp. 107–11. Jane Addams led the singing of 'Onward Christian Soldiers' at the Progressive party convention in 1912. A pacifist, she broke with Roosevelt when he strongly endorsed America going to war against Germany, even though she had accepted the new battleships proposed in the 1912 Progressive manifesto.
- 11 cf. material in Inez Haynes Irwin Papers (Radcliffe College, Harvard). But American campaigners for women's suffrage rejoiced in the fact that their successful movement did not require the militant methods of the British suffragettes. They viewed the Pankhursts with some reserve. Women voted in some numbers in the presidential election of 1916 and boosted Woodrow Wilson's vote in the decisive far western states.
- 12 The personal and intellectual link between the state and the university in Madison is symbolized by State Street, connecting the legislature and the university in Madison.
- 13 See William M. Armstrong (ed.), *The Gilded Age; Letters of E.L. Godkin* (University of New York Press, 1975).
- 14 See Arthur Mann, *Yankee Reformers in the Urban Age: Social Reform in Boston* (Belknap Press, 1954)
- 15 Lincoln Steffens, *Autobiography* Vol. I (Harcourt, Brace, 1931), pp. 648. Steffens later became a famous enthusiast for the Soviet Union – 'I have seen the future and it works.'
- 16 There is a most interesting discussion of these matters in Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Belknap Press, 1998), a pioneering work.
- 17 In New York during the mid-term elections of 1962, while I was resident in Manhattan, I was struck by the Democrats voicing support, from veterans like Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt and ex-Senator Herbert Lehmann, for their senatorial candidate, Robert Morgenthau, whose father had served prominently in Roosevelt's cabinet in 1933. He lost.
- 18 Williams, *Hugh Gaitskell* (Cape, 1979).
- 19 *The Outlook*, 3 December 1905
- 20 *ibid.*, 25 August 1906
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 William Leuchtenburg, 'American Progressives and Imperialism – Progressive and American Foreign Policy (1898–1920)', *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXXIX.